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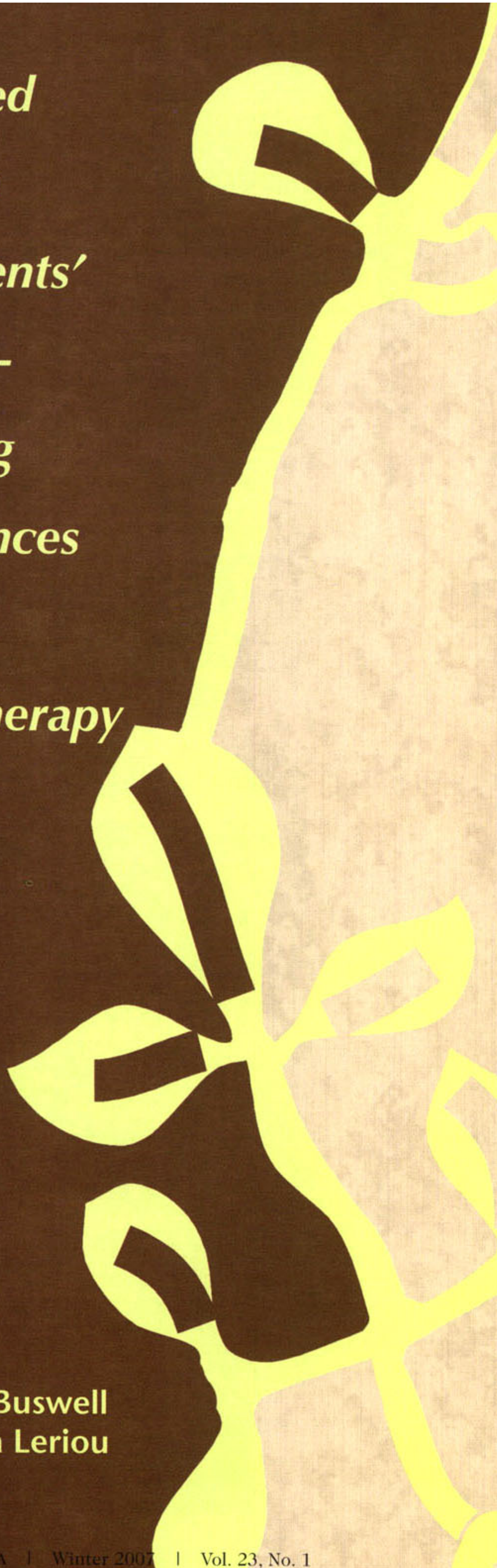
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Perceived Benefits of Students' Service - Learning Experiences with Hippotherapy

By
Deborah Buswell
and Filitsa Leriou

Introduction

The term *hippotherapy* has its roots in the Greek language, and is translated as *treatment with the help of the horse* (Glasow, 2003). Using horseback riding as a form of natural exercise dates back to Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.). Although therapeutic riding and hippotherapy are both used as forms of treatment for persons with disabilities, they are not synonymous. Hippotherapy is prescribed by a physician and utilizes equine movement as part of a treatment strategy and is used by physical, occupational, and speech therapists "as part of an integrated treatment program to achieve functional outcomes" (American Hippotherapy Association, 2003, What is hippotherapy?, ¶1). Therapeutic riding is generally a program of supervised recreational riding and thus, a less restrictive environment than hippotherapy. For additional information on therapeutic riding see *PALAESTRA*, 22(4), 46, 56 – Therapeutic Riding – An Overview. Success in hippotherapy may lead to an individual's continued participation through a program in therapeutic riding. Both hippotherapy and therapeutic riding may be offered at the same facility.

Researchers have shown a horse's rhythmical movement, resembling the human gait, can help improve an individual's muscle tone, balance, posture, flexibility, coordination, and motor development (Gatty, n.d). At the same time, relationships formed between horses and riders can help improve emotional well-being, including self-confidence, self-esteem, and self awareness (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003). Both hippotherapy and therapeutic riding have been used to benefit individuals with medical conditions, and/or functional impairments, such as cerebral palsy, stroke, developmental delays, Down syndrome, learning disabilities, multiple sclerosis, sensory integrative dysfunction, traumatic brain injury, and many others. Lessons are designed on an individual basis and participants start as early as 18 to 24 months of age.

Volunteers serve as essential parts in the operation of therapeutic riding programs. Without volunteers many of these programs could not operate. Most riding centers need a minimum of 50 volunteers per year. More than 25,000 people volunteer their time within North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) centers each year. According to NARHA, 80% of all therapists, instructors, and center administrators are volunteers (NARHA, 2003). Experience is not required for most volunteers and training is generally provided by the facility to ensure the safety of both participants and volunteers, as well as to meet insurance requirements. NARHA (1999) believes, "a well-trained volunteer is safe, effective, and enhances the quality of the therapeutic riding program, while making the lesson enjoyable" (p.113). Volunteer training is often provided by program directors and instructors registered through NARHA (see Figure 1). Many programs expect volunteers to work at the facility one to two times per week. Depending on the volunteer's abilities and interests, there are many areas in which assistance may be needed—leading horses during lessons, side-walking (see Figure 2, pg 22), grooming/bathing horses and other general care, and maintenance duties (see Figure 3, pg 22). Volunteers are

crucial for a successful program. In fact, most therapeutic riding centers would not be able to function without their volunteers—but do volunteers benefit from participating in these programs?

Related Research

Although no research could be located on benefits of individuals volunteering at therapeutic riding centers, there have been a number of studies examining the benefits of volunteering in general, and specifically, benefits of students engaging in service-learning experiences. According to Eyler and Giles (1999), service-learning/volunteering is a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students work with others through a process of applying what they are learning to community problems. At the same time, they reflect on their experiences seeking to achieve real objectives for the community in addition to deeper understanding and skills for themselves.

In adapted physical activity courses faculty generally include some form of practicum experience or what many in education now label as a service-learning component (Emes & Velde, 2005). For additional information on the use and issues in using service-learning in adapted physical activity courses see Sherrill, *PALAESTR*A, 22(4), 55-56. These experiences provide students with opportunities to interact with individuals who have disabilities in a variety of practical environments such as Special Olympics, Blaze Sports programs, adapted physical education in public schools, and therapeutic riding programs, to name a few. Choices of placements outside of public school settings allow undergraduate students who are not

planning to go into teaching with opportunities to have these experiences in settings that will be more applicable to their future employment.

A number of studies have documented benefits of participation in service-learning experiences for undergraduate students. Little and Harris (2003) reported statistically significant improvements in areas related to academic achievement including motivation, test scores, attitudes toward school or academics, college attendance, competence, educational aspirations, grades, lower rates of course failures, and overall academic performance. In a study by Astin and Sax (1998), utilizing student self-report, outcome measures such as civic responsibility and life skills, were favorably influenced by service-learning participation. They also reported improvements in student grade point average (GPA), retention, degree completion, amount of interaction with faculty, and increases in knowledge. A study by Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray (2000) reported, "service-learning has a positive effect on student personal development such as sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development" (p.1).

Additional studies reported improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem

(Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform, 1995), feelings of satisfaction, and affirmation of mastered skills through providing a service seen as valuable by the community (Gray, Ondaatje, & Zakaras, 1999). The Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1995) reported the "reflective process can lead students to acquire insights that allow them to build on their strengths and set goals in areas where they know they need further development" (p. 7). According to the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2001), "As a consequence of this immediacy of experience, Service-Learning is more likely to be personally meaningful to participants and to generate emotional consequences, to challenge values as well as ideas, and hence to support social, emotional and cognitive learning and development" (p. 2).

A number of studies also documented benefits for students majoring in physical education who participate in service-learning types of practica. Hodge, Tannehill, and Kluge (2003) suggested opportunities to engage in journaling as part of practicum experiences allowed physical education teacher education (PETE) students with opportunities to "identify issues, address problems, and think critically about best practices" (p. 381). A comparison of practicum types demonstrated that although attitude scores did not change significantly over the course of the practicum, the perceived competence scores did rise significantly, regardless of practicum type (Hodge, Davis, Woodard, & Sherrill, 2002). The purpose of the current study was to examine perception of benefits experienced by one group of volunteers engaging in a service-learning practicum at a therapeutic riding facility in central Texas and other service-learning practicum experiences in adapted physical education, adapted aquatics, etc.



Figure 1. Volunteers with advanced training can become Registered Instructors through NARHA and assist in training volunteers. Both adults are registered instructors with NARHA, one is a physical therapist and the other program director of the facility. (Photo courtesy of R.O.C.K., Georgetown, TX, www.rockride.org)

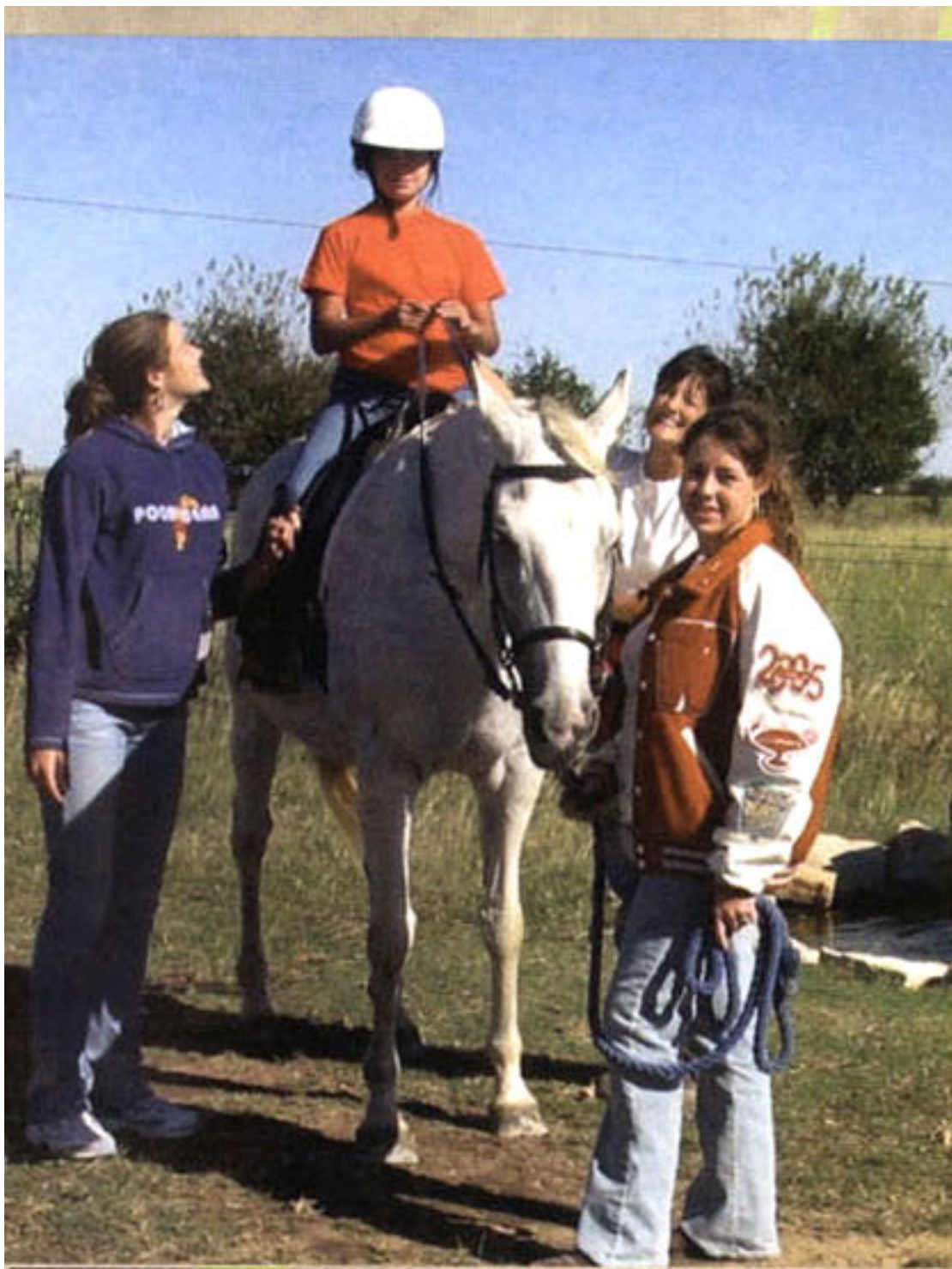


Figure 2. Depending on skill level of the rider, one volunteer leads the horse and one or two side-walkers are available to assure safety of the riders and assist if necessary. (Photo courtesy of R.O.C.K., Georgetown, TX, www.rockride.org)

Method

Participants

This study was part of a larger research project in which 241 students participating in either an introduction to adapted physical education course or an introduction to therapeutic recreation course during the 2004 calendar year were surveyed to determine perceived benefits of participating in service-learning experiences. In each class one component for grading was completing service-learning *volunteer* hours with individuals with disabilities in physical activity settings. The 68 participants in the current study completed all or part of their service-learning requirement at Always Wanted A Riding Experience (AWARE), a therapeutic riding center accredited by NARHA. AWARE is located in San Marcos, Texas, and serves approximately 140 clients each year, accepting children as young as two years of age with no upper age limit. Its primary goal is to “improve its clients quality of life by offering an opportunity for therapy, exercise, and recreation” (AWARE, n.d., ¶1).

Instrument

The instrument used to survey the participants consisted of three parts. Part One—demographic questions for gender, age, in which class students were enrolled, number of hours completed, and previous experience. Part Two—27 questions using a

5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree, designed to elicit responses about attitudes towards persons with disabilities, perceived benefits from the experience, and increases in skills and knowledge about the subject area (i.e., either adapted physical activity or therapeutic recreation). Part Three—an open-ended question (i.e., explain what you believe you gained from your volunteering experience this semester) to allow students to elaborate on perceived benefits in their own words.

The survey was developed utilizing and modifying questions from a variety of existing instruments used by the Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform (1995) and Make-A-Wish Foundation (2004). Additional questions were developed based on results of previous research by Gray, Ondaatje, and Zakaras (1999) and Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray (2000). Surveys were administered at the conclusion of each course for three consecutive semesters utilizing accepted practices of consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and knowledge that information would be used for research purposes.

Results

Participants

The 68 participants surveyed for this study ranged in age from 20-42 years ($M = 22.93$), 55% were male and 44% were female. Most of the participants (75%) had never participated in similar programs. Participants documented a total of 1,052.5 ($M = 15.47$) hours of service-learning during the semester in which they completed the survey. This subset of participants was utilized for examination as they all spent at least some of their service-learning hours participating at a therapeutic riding center. Almost 30% of the participants completed all (15 required hours) of their service-learning hours at AWARE. Approximately 30% of the participants split time between AWARE and one other program such as Special Olympics, public school adapted physical education, adapted aquatics, or other similar volunteer experiences. And 40% of the participants split time between AWARE and two or more other programs. Fifty-two of the participants specified number of hours spent at AWARE versus other programs. This group reported spending 599 hours at AWARE ($M = 11.52$) during the course of the semester. Other participants gave a total number of hours but did not specify how many of the total hours were spent at AWARE.

Frequency distributions were determined on each of the 27 questions. Overall results from a frequency distribution on the 27 questions in Part Two indicated students perceived their experiences to be beneficial in a variety of different ways, including empathy, knowledge, and self-concept variables (i.e., encompassing beliefs, attitudes, intentions). They also indicated they believed their participation was beneficial for the individuals with disabilities with whom they worked. There was not a formal analysis of the narrative comments made for this study and narrative comments were used here only to provide examples of perceived benefits (from Part Two) in participants' own words.

In regard to empathy, all of the participants agreed (or strongly agreed) the experience helped them understand some difficulties and situations persons with disabilities face. A male participant stated, “I feel like I gained the trust of several individuals,



Figure 3. Volunteers are carefully trained to groom the horses and complete such tasks as picking the hooves. This vital aspect of volunteer training helps to insure safety and health of the animals, many of which have been donated to the program. (Photo courtesy of A.W.A.R.E., San Marcos, TX, www.awareranch.org)

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which is a great feeling. I furthermore feel that I gained insight into what it is like to live with a disability."

Participants improved their understanding of the theory/content aspects of the course (91% agreed or strongly agreed), and all agreed (or strongly agreed) they increased their knowledge relative to working with individuals with disabilities. Participants also believed they gained new skills from the experience (88% agreed or strongly agreed). A male participant stated:

What I gained from this class can't come from tests or a book. I learned how to interact with children with disabilities on a personal level...Someone could have all the book smarts about disabilities in the world, but that would mean nothing without knowing what each individual enjoys doing or what makes him/her laugh and be happy.

Various self-concept variables were measured using questions regarding gratification, satisfaction, self-esteem, future intentions to participate, and intentions to recommend the experience to others. One participant felt the experience was not personally gratifying and 72% strongly agreed that it was personally gratifying. Personal satisfaction was also very strong with 61%

strongly agreeing that it was personally satisfying and 34% agreeing it was personally satisfying. No participants stated the experience was not personally satisfying.

Self-esteem and self-worth were two self-concept variables that 76% strongly agreed (or agreed) increased as a result of their participation in the service-learning experience. Additionally, 83% strongly agreed (or agreed) their confidence increased as a result of their experiences. One female participant stated, "I also have gained confidence and a more 'at ease' feeling when working with those individuals who have both mental and physical disabilities."

Ninety-seven percent of the participants strongly agreed (or agreed) the experience was enjoyable. Ninety percent strongly agreed (or agreed) they would like to participate in similar activities in the future, and 97% would recommend a similar experience to other students. A number of individuals had statements similar to the following: "I want to continue volunteering at different sites so I can gain more knowledge and experience." There was a small percentage of students (6%) who strongly agreed (or agreed) that the lab hours were a waste of time.

Based on their experiences throughout the course of the semester, students perceived the individuals with disabilities with whom they worked during the semester also received some benefit. Almost 84% of participants strongly agreed (or agreed) they made a difference and positively influenced the lives of the persons with whom they worked. And 97% strongly agreed (or agreed) they have the power to make a difference in peoples lives. One student commented, "I felt that I helped the kids that I worked with and I felt good about myself," while another stated, "I have gained the ability to help and assist those with disabilities to an extent far greater than I had before." Results for all questions are in Table 1. One participant stated the following as a summary statement of the entire semester and what she felt she had gained:

At the beginning of the course I was very intimidated to work with people with disabilities because I had never done it before...Just helping other people out made me feel good. It was a great experience and I will continue volunteer work after the semester. Being able to make little kids smile is very rewarding.

Table 1
Percentage of Participant Responses to Survey Statements

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD
The time I spent in lab was personally gratifying	72.06	26.47	0.00	0.00	1.47
I think my lab hours were a waste of time	4.41	1.47	0.00	32.35	61.76
It was overwhelming working with persons with disabilities	7.35	2.94	7.35	63.24	19.12
It was very rewarding working with persons with disabilities	70.59	27.94	1.47	0.00	0.00
Helping individuals with disabilities made me feel needed and appreciated	42.65	50.00	7.35	0.00	0.00
I feel I made a difference and positively influenced the lives of the persons whom I worked with	29.41	54.41	16.18	0.00	0.00
I feel that my lab hours enhanced my personal development	57.35	38.24	4.41	0.00	0.00
My lab hours were an enjoyable experience	64.71	32.35	2.94	0.00	0.00
I felt a sense of community or belonging while doing my lab hours	39.71	50.00	10.29	0.00	0.00
This experience helped me understand some of the difficulties and situations that persons with disabilities face	66.18	33.82	0.00	0.00	0.00
I realized I have the power to make a difference in peoples' lives	41.18	55.88	2.94	0.00	0.00
As a result of my fieldwork hours, I feel I have more appreciation for life	55.88	38.24	4.41	1.47	0.00
I discovered talents and skills I didn't know I had	14.71	45.59	32.35	7.35	0.00
I feel the lab hours challenged my skills and abilities	22.06	52.94	20.59	4.41	0.00
I would like to participate in similar activities in the future	55.88	33.82	0.00	10.29	0.00
I am considering pursuing a career focusing on individuals with disabilities	11.76	19.12	47.06	20.59	1.47
I would recommend a similar volunteering experience to other students	72.06	25.00	2.94	0.00	0.00
As a result of my lab hours, I feel like I don't take things as much for granted	37.31	52.24	4.48	4.48	1.49
I believe completing the lab hours has improved my understanding of the theory/content aspects of the course	38.81	52.24	8.96	0.00	0.00
I believe my contribution to the program was appropriately acknowledged	38.81	52.24	8.96	0.00	0.00
I believe I have gained personal satisfaction from my lab experience	61.19	34.33	4.48	0.00	0.00
I believe I have increased my knowledge relative to working with individuals with disabilities	53.73	46.27	0.00	0.00	0.00
My self-esteem and self-worth have improved as a result of my lab experience	25.37	50.75	19.40	4.48	0.00
I believe I have gained new skills from my lab experience	35.82	52.24	7.46	4.48	0.00
I believe I have gained career contacts from my lab experience	25.37	41.79	20.90	10.45	1.49
I believe I have gained new social contacts (i.e., made new friends) from my lab experience	28.36	58.21	5.97	7.46	0.00
My confidence has improved as a result of my lab experience	34.85	48.48	13.64	3.03	0.00

Note: SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, U = Undecided, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

Discussion and Conclusions

Overwhelmingly students participating in this study reported they benefited from their service-learning experiences (see Table 1). Based on the results of this study, there was a high level of personal gratification and satisfaction, skills and knowledge increased outside of the lecture portion of the class, and students personally experienced increases in self-esteem, self-worth, and confidence. Participation in these experiences led students to report they would like to participate in similar activities in the future, and they would recommend similar experiences to other students. Participants also believed they could have a positive impact on the lives of individuals with disabilities. This seems to indicate the overwhelmingly positive experience these students received from AWARE and other placements.

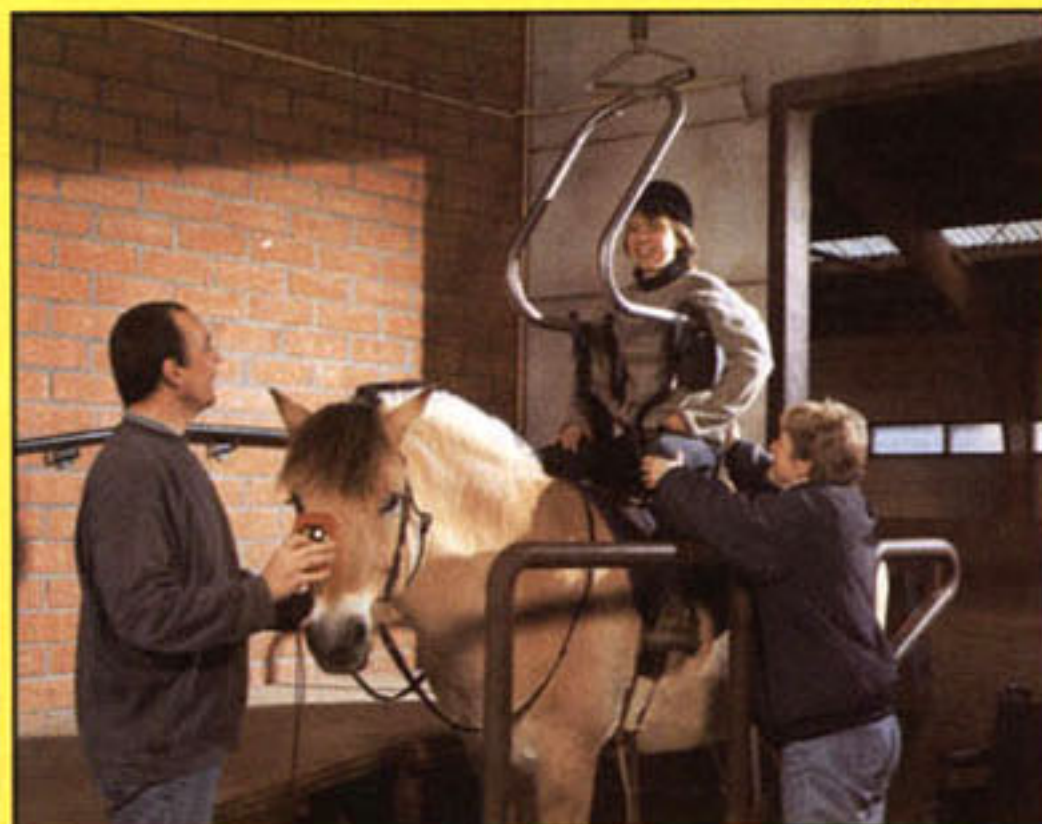
Service-learning experiences can be fun, rewarding, and inspiring. It offers faculty with opportunities to provide *real-world* experiences outside typical classroom experience or public school experiences in which many students in teacher preparation programs participate, but which may not be applicable for non-certification majors taking the adapted physical activity or therapeutic recreation courses. Service-learning also provides programs such as AWARE with much needed assistance in the form of volunteers. And finally, it offers students with opportunities for self-growth, acquisition of new skills, and development of deeper understanding about individuals with disabilities. One participant stated this clearly when she wrote, "People with disabilities are unique and all have their own talents and personalities. Thanks to my experiences I truly saw the different gifts people have."

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for their knowledge and passion in working with individuals with disabilities, as well as the staff and participants who consented to use of their photographs for this article.

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